

THE PHOENIX

In 1995 I made a discovery that provided a consistent solution to puzzles in ancient myths & scripture. A brief outline of that discovery appears in *The Lunar Basis of Myth & Symbol*.

To illustrate how this discovery unlocks the meaning of myth, here's an example of a well-known myth that remained unsolved before the discovery.

"They [the Egyptians] have also another sacred bird called the Phoenix, which I myself have never seen, except in pictures. Indeed it is a great rarity, even in Egypt only coming there (according to the accounts of the people of Heliopolis) once in 500 years, when the old Phoenix dies [Herodotus, Histories Book 2: 73, translated by George Rawlinson, 1858: John Murray]."

The myth of the Phoenix rising every 500 years involves the difference between a 25-year Egyptian calendar cycle (amounting to 9125 days), & the number of lunations in that period (309). Also known as the actual lunar month, the lunation extends 29.530588 days (with 309 lunations totalling 9124.9516 days). Thus it can be seen that the interval of 25 years exceeds 309 lunations by 0.0484 day (*ie*, 1 hour 9 minutes 42 seconds).

The 25-year calendar cycle was a sacred (*ie*, secret) cycle maintained by the Egyptian priests as a check on actual time measure, because it came so close to convergence with an integral number of lunations (309).

In accordance with this, the priests venerated & cared for a white bull known as the Apis bull, which they killed & stuffed at the end of its 25-year 'reign'. Stuffed Apis bulls were preserved in the Serapeum at Saqqara as a palpable measure of elapsed time (the cache of mummified bulls in the catacombs preserving a cumulative record of earlier Apis cycles).

Every 500 years, the extra 0.0484-day portion of their 25-year cycle (which exceeds those 309 lunations), accumulates close to an entire day, putting 'the calendar year' a day ahead of the lunar cycle; thus requiring the subtraction of a day from their calendar every 500 years, to bring the sun back into alignment with the moon. This explains the *burning* of the Phoenix (burn off that extra day) so that a new 500-year cycle can rise again from the ash.

As becomes evident, ancient calendars were calibrated to lunar cycle – the previously unrecognized key to interpreting myth – *not the sun*, with which the Phoenix & so many other mythical figures have long been expressly associated.

And to preserve this data over the lengthy interval of 25 generations ($25 \times 20 = 500$ years) required a mnemonic tale or myth that would resonate with descendants responsible for adjusting future calendars, to maintain attendance to this semi-millennial adjustment.

Here's the supporting math from my book *Myth as Math*, p262:

The 500-year 6180-lunation 182,500-day Phoenix Cycle

- [1] $25 \text{ years} \times 365 \text{ days} = 9125 \text{ days}$ (25-year Solar Apis Cycle).
- [2] $309 \text{ lunations} \times 29.530588 \text{ days} = 9124.9516 \text{ days}$ (309-lunation Lunar Apis Cycle).
- [3] $9125 - 9124.9516 = 0.0484\text{-day}$ discrepancy per 25-year cycle.
- [4] $20 \text{ cycles} \times 0.0484 \text{ day} = 0.968 \text{ day}$ (23 hours 13 minutes 55 seconds \approx one added day).

The 500-year ‘great year’ of the Phœnix represented the accumulation of ‘close to an additional day’ (0.968 day) every ‘twenty Apis solar intervals’ across the extended Egyptian calendar. An extra day which needed to be ‘burnt away’ or subtracted from the solar calendar to bring it back into line with the observable lunar cycle.

*“Another sacred bird is the Phœnix; I have not seen a Phœnix myself, except in paintings, for it is very rare and visits the country (so they say at Heliopolis) only at intervals of 500 years, on the occasion of the death of the parent-bird [Herodotus, *The Histories* Book 2: 73, translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt, 1954: Penguin Books, p124].”*

Herodotus (ca 485–426 BC) was arguably in Egypt about 460 BC (aged 25). His account of the Phœnix gathered from the Heliopolitan priests, includes a report that the bird was purple. A quality cleverly alluding to a blend of red & blue (ie, sun & moon) – providing a vital clue to the lunisolar nature of the myth.

In addition, it was said to come from Arabia (east of Egypt); its immolation occurring not only where the sun rises but also where the lunation ends (or is ‘burnt out’). Though largely unrecognized, each new lunar cycle first appears in the western sky, & is extinguished at its close (after 29.530588 days), in the east.

The *evidence* for reading myths from a lunar perspective is consistently substantiated by mathematical *proofs* based on numbers incorporated in the stories. Proofs however which first require the recognition that those numbers address a lunar model, before doing the math (ie, conducting mathematical operations on them using addition, subtraction, multiplication or division). Math not only based on an understanding of the lunation, but also on the extended ‘course’ (230-lunation) & ‘phase’ (235-lunation) cycles of the moon.

Modern interpretations of the Phœnix myth conversely fasten on ‘regeneration’ in asserting that it generically symbolizes the concept of ‘life after death’. In a similar manner, other ancient myths of a cyclical nature (which likewise conceal calendar measures), are categorically reduced to fertility myths (eg, Persephone). As if the ancient Greeks were dumb enough to need convoluted fables to memorialize the return of spring..!

Though the mathematics involved in such myths aren’t complex, many who *can* do the math when required, have no proclivity for sustained numerate reflection on their own (which in the present case leads to an understanding of the need to adjust the solar to the lunar measures). Literate scholars who lack this numerate initiative, reflexively default to metaphysical & psychological explanations for the otherwise incomprehensible aspects in myth (yet expertly resort to literal readings of what appears natural).

What such authorities fail to appreciate is that a lunar key which has been shown to decipher the parietal art of the Palæolithic & Neolithic periods, proves consistent with the lunar key required to compute the insights in later myths. See my papers, *Lascaux Measures*, and *Çatal Höyük Bull-Hunt Mural*; as well as my reading of 'The Venus of Laussel' in *The Lunar Basis of Myth & Symbol* (pp17/8).

In other words, an identical lunar iconography to that found in the Hellenic & Egyptian mythologies (cultures characterized by many as "usurping patriarchies"), appears at the core of more ancient myths & figures (from reputedly matrilineal cultures), all consistently focused on the identical metrological computation of lunar measure.

Those who developed this system, knew enough to conceal their hard-won insights into lunar measure (which had taken millennia to gather through observation & computation), from those who would never think to do the math – thereby preserving the meaning against corruption from those literate enough to relay inherited myths but not numerately inclined to crunch the numbers. Those who could be relied upon to preserve the narrative, without losing the key.

When I say 'numerate' I don't mean 'numerological'. Uninitiated scholars back to the Classical Greek era – who weren't privy to the fact that the Pythagorean focus on 'number' involved a lunar model one first had to become familiar with to properly interpret the *instrumental* nature of myth – expediently reduced 'numeracy' to numerological games involving the conversion of 'letters in names' into numbers (gematria) which led later in history to the *intrinsic* permutations of Kabbalah (& similar recreational diversions of other closed systems like Tarot). The problem with introducing artificial distinctions to solve puzzles, is that they tend to generate divergent rather than focal solutions.

If there's no god, Kabbalah's just mystical snakes & ladders.

Here are some reductions of the Phœnix myth advanced by a few modern authorities:

Ernest Alfred Thompson Wallis-Budge (1857–1934)

"The name of the Phœnix in Egyptian is 'Bennu' and this bird played a very prominent part in Egyptian mythology, but the texts do not bear out the extraordinary assertions which have been made about it by classical writers. According to the story which Herodotus heard at Heliopolis (ii. 73), the bird visited that place once every 500 years, on its father's death; when it was 500, or 1461 years old, it burnt itself to death. It was supposed to resemble an eagle, and to have red and gold feathers, and to come from Arabia; before its death it built a nest to which it gave the power of producing a new phœnix, though some thought that a worm crept out of its body before it died, and that from it the heat of the sun developed a new phœnix. Others thought that it died after a life of 7006 years, and another view was that the new Phœnix rose from the burnt and decomposing remains of his old body, and that he took these to Heliopolis where he burnt them. All these fabulous stories are the result of misunderstandings of the Egyptian myth which declared that the renewed morning sun rose in the form of a Bennu, and of the belief which declared that the bird was the soul of Ra and also the living symbol of Osiris, and that it came forth from the very heart of the god [Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians or Studies in Egyptian Mythology* Volume II, 1904: Methuen, pp96/7]."

Harold Bayley (1881–1943)

“In all probability the Palm was pre-eminently a symbol of the immutable and never-dying Fire, as being the only tree known to the ancients which never changed its leaves, all other evergreens shedding them, though not regularly nor all at once. The Phœnicians represented on their coinage a palm-tree encoiled by a serpent, and the Phœnician Deity was entitled Baal-Tamar or ‘Lord of the Palm’. ‘Tamar’ resolves into “resplendent Sun-Fire”; ‘phenice’, the Hebrew word for “palm” may be anglicized into “Fan-Light” – an obviously appropriate term; and ‘phœnix’, the Greek for “palm” may be equated with the sole Phœnix, Feu, or Vie, the one Great Fire of Life [Bayley, *The Lost Language of Symbolism* Volume II, 1912: Williams & Norgate, p276].”

Stith Thompson (1885–1976)

B32. Phœnix. *Hdwb. d. deutschen Aberglaubens I 180; *Gunkel Das Märchen im alten Testament 36f; Roscher Lexikon III 3450 s.v. “Phoinix”. —Fb “phœnix”. —Medieval Romance: Wells Manual of Writings 105 (Prose Alexander). —Chinese: Ferguson 98, Eberhard FFC CXX 117 No. 73; Irish myth: Cross; Jewish: Neuman.

B32.1. Phœnix renews youth. Fb “ørn” III 1183b; Egyptian: Müller 165f.

B32.1.1. Phœnix renews youth when 1,000 years old. Jewish: Neuman.

[Thompson, *from ‘Mythical Birds’ in the section ‘Animal Motifs’, Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, 1933: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, Helsinki].

Joseph John Campbell (1904–87)

In Campbell’s view, his transcendent ‘monomyth’ of the Eternal Hero’s descent & return, imparted metaphysical, cosmological, sociological & pedagogical instruction for ancient cultures; with the Philosopher’s Stone (or grail) ostensibly responsible for the resurrection of the immortal phœnix. An apparent myth of regeneration, it was subsequently appropriated by successive cultures to symbolize the rewards of faith & fealty (their historical justification for sustaining the concepts of resurrection & rebirth).

Mircea Eliade (1907–86)

“His theory that hierophanies [manifestations of the sacred] form the basis of religion, splitting the human experience of reality into sacred and profane space and time, has proved influential. One of his most instrumental contributions to religious studies was his theory of eternal return, which holds that myths and rituals do not simply commemorate hierophanies, but, at least in the minds of the religious, actually participate in them [Wikipedia].” In other words, myths allow us to relive sacred experiences of the past; a thesis that lacks foundation if ancient myth & religion are, as demonstrated in my work, cover stories for calendar measure. I’ve consulted thirteen of his books without encountering a reference to the Phœnix, including the nineteen Egyptian texts in his thematic sourcebook, *From Primitives to Zen* (1967: Harper & Row).

Barbara Goodwin Jones (b. 1930) Mrs Gordon Northrop Walker (1952)

“Egyptians identified the Phœnician god Phœnix [son of Agenor & Telephassa] with their bennu bird, a spirit of the benben or phallic obelisk. He rose to heaven in the form of the Morning Star, like Lucifer, after his fire-immolation of death and rebirth [citing Budge]. In Phœnicia as in Egypt he embodied the sacred king cremated and reborn. Symbolic burning of the king continued up to the present century in Upper Egypt, on the first day

of each solar year by Coptic reckoning [citing James Frazer]. The king's soul released above the pyre assumed bird form, as ancient pharaohs at their cremation took the form of the Horus-hawk [Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, 1983: HarperCollins, p798]."

Røelof Van Den Brøek (b. 1931)

His exhaustive survey of sources cites various interpretations "symboliz[ing] renewal in general as well as the sun, time, the Empire, metempsychosis, consecration, resurrection, life in the heavenly Paradise, Christ, Mary, virginity, the exceptional man, and certain aspects of Christian life [Van Den Brøek, *The Myth of the Phoenix: According to Classical and Early Christian Traditions*, 1971: Brill]."

Edwin Charles Krupp (b. 1944)

"A magical bird that expires in a fire sounds, however, like a star that dies in the western twilight. Its return flight from the far east sounds like a star that rises heliacally in the east. These considerations and other similarities between the benu and the Phœnix inspired some ancient writers to forge a link between them whether there should be one or not. Tacitus, a Roman historian in the first and second centuries AD, reported that the bird's journey to the east and back consumed 1461 years. He probably picked this up from the Egyptians.* They judged that it took the heliacal rising of Sirius 1461 years to cycle completely through their 365-day calendar. This period of time is known as the Sothic cycle and is named after Sothis, the Greek version of the Egyptian name for Sirius. By estimating the length of the year one-quarter of a day short, the Egyptians guaranteed that the heliacal rising of Sirius would arrive one-quarter of a day late the following year, one full day late in four years. This daily loss per year for 1461 years (each 365 days long) adds up to 365¼ days, just about one true solar year. They knew the solar year lasted more than 365 days, but they chose to use that number and remained unperturbed by the drift of New Year's Day through the calendar and the seasons. It would, after all, wind up back where it started after 1461 years [Dr E.C. Krupp, *Beyond the Blue Horizon: Myths and Legends of the Sun, Moon, Stars, and Planets*, 1991: Oxford University Press, pp221/2]."

* With respect to the uncertainty of Tacitus's source: "Sirius rises heliacally each summer but on the first of Thot only once (for four consecutive years) in 1460 years; this date, nevertheless, is assumed by modern scholars to have been celebrated yearly as the day of the symbolic rising of Sirius or the day of the Opening of the Year...there is no known instance of an event being recorded by the serial year of a Sothic period. There is no Egyptian document known to mention the Sothic period or to state, 'In such or such year of the Sothic era'. According to the view predominant at present, the Sothic period is not regarded as an era by which the ancients reckoned the years; it is employed by moderns only as a device to calculate chronological dates. But for that purpose vanishingly few references in ancient texts are available... [Immanuel Velikovsky, *Peoples of the Sea*, 1977: Doubleday, pp218/9]."

It bears noting that Dr Krupp, "a popularizer of science [&] internationally recognized expert in the field of archæoastronomy [Wikipedia]", equated the Phœnix myth with 'adjustment of the calendar', because a later ancient source had cited an interval of 1461 years between consecutive appearances of 'the bird' (Tacitus, *Annals* 6.28). Lending an

authoritative vote of plausibility to associated solutions like mine which also involve calendar adjustment.

Yet none of the experts cited above, it bears stressing, have offered the slightest explanation of the role 'the 500 years' play, in their superficial reductions of the myth to the concept of 'regeneration'.

Those who say "so what?" miss the point. The present paper doesn't merely provide a solution to the previously unsolved Phoenix myth, but substantiates the thesis that lunar measure rests at the base of all ancient myth & scripture.

An incalculably more consequential proof appears in *Noah by the Numbers*, for those who continue to believe in the biblical story of the Flood. Have those who say "so what?" even stopped to consider the consequences resulting from a proof that biblical texts have nothing to do with divinity?

The indisputable validity of the lunar key with respect to other ancient myths – thereby providing evidence of consistency across numerous cultures – is yet more remarkably substantiated in *The Lunar Context of the Hekat Fractions*, considering conventional appraisals of Egyptian math & time-measure.

Still it is *The Lunar Basis of Myth & Symbol* that remains crucial to understanding the thesis, explaining not only how the discovery was made but also how it works.

Together with the papers & books of mine cited above, other texts which expand on this discovery are all freely accessible online at Internet Archive (with a handful also nested at ResearchGate).

Nick Drumbolis

lettersbookshops@gmail.com